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'Missing: The Search & the Sorrow

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The Political Drama Behind the Screen

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DALTON TRUMBO, the Hollywood screenwriter, once said that during the blacklist period of the late '40s and early '50s there were "only victims." One would be tempted to say the same thing is true in "Missing," the Costa-Gavras picture telling of the 1973 Chilean execution of a young American named Charles Horman, if it weren't for one exception. Universal Pictures, which opened "Missing" a little more than three weeks ago in seven theaters around the country, is slightly astonished to discover that it is that Hollywood anomaly—a political picture whose grosses are, *Variety* said last week, "heavy," "amash," "incendiary."

"In its first 13 days in those theaters," said Gordon Armstrong, a Universal Vice President in charge of marketing and advertising, "we brought in \$500,000. And those were small theaters. Three hundred seats in San Francisco, 500 New York, 300 in Boston," he said Friday, they "open wide."

When Universal opens wide, it means 600 theaters, and Hollywood will discover whether or not America will buy a picture whose story its government disavows, one of the few commercial, overtly political films to come out of the industry since the Vietnam era ended. "We were confident," Armstrong said, "but not overconfident. It was, we were sure, a movie people can relate to on a human level. If it was just a political film, it would go down the toilet quickly."

Hollywood will work hard to nail "Missing's" good business to its human and not its political strength. Nevertheless, in the weeks since it has opened, it has drawn good reviews, torrential controversy, the committed attention of both mainstream and alternative press, the deep interest of ideologues and former State Department employees around the world. It has attracted classical arguments between factions forming on the sides of Art and Truth on the matter of their

connecting tether—and yet there are victims all over.

Surely, the Horman family are victims, and surely some Chileans were as well. Former U.S. ambassador to Chile Nathaniel P. Davis says there is another kind of victimization. "What I saw in the picture never happened," he says. "The scenes that were shown may have existed in someone's mind but I don't remember them."

In the case of Edmund Horman, father of Charles Horman who searched for his son through civil strife and against what he calls an unresponsive American embassy, it brings memories and emphatic statements of "Missing's" veracity.

In the days following the September 1973 coup in which Salvador Allende's socialist government was felled, Charles Horman, 30, disappeared.

On Oct. 4, 1973, Edmund Horman went to Santiago from his home in Manhattan to search for his only son. That search is the subject of "Missing." It is a story based on a book by Thomas Hauser, a story with which the State Department has already taken issue, in the form of a rare formal statement just prior to the film's release.

That statement said in part: "The Department of State undertook intensive and comprehensive efforts to locate Charles Horman from the moment that it was learned he was missing, to assist his relatives in their efforts to locate him, and also to learn the circumstances of his disappearance and death . . . These efforts continued for eight years and involved many special investigations, cooperation with other agencies and included an internal investigation of the possibility that U.S. government officials might have initiated, condoned or failed to act effectively in Horman's disappearance and death." The statement said those investigations revealed nothing about Horman's disappearance.

To that, Edmund Horman has said, "The things



Edmund Horman